PITTA

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HSBC Hyderabad Bird Race: Sunday, 2nd March 2025, 5.30AM: Flag off from Tourism Plaza Hotel, Begumpet. Event Coordinator(s): Srikanth Bhamidipati (Mobile: 97388-40070); Gokul Krishna Addanki (Mobile: 99453-46585); Gowthama Poludasu (Mobile: 94409-10967); Sathwik Reddy Nimma (Mobile: 99858-07186)

This is the 17th edition of the HSBC Hyderabad Bird Race, an annual event where bird lovers form teams and get involved in the dawn-to-dusk frenzy of spotting and recording bird species in and around the twic cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad. The event is open to all – members and non-members, birders and non-birders – so invite all your friends who would be interested in spending the day out with birds. More details will be shared on email.

MONSOON BIRDING

Trip Report: Thattekad Bird Sanctuary & Munnar Sholas, Kerala, July 04-05, 2024

Text & Photos: Aditya Rao

Sri Lanka Frogmouth female (L) and male (R)

Bird enthusiasts in inland India often consider July and August less interesting due to the incessant rains, dull weather, and limited bird activity. However, in my opinion, this period is underrated. Many birds breed and hence are highly active during the monsoons. While the wet conditions can be challenging, the cool relief after the intense summer heat makes it worthwhile. Additionally, from a photography perspective, the soft light and lush greenery create an ideal setting to observe and capture the beauty of these wonderful birds.

I was traveling for work to Kochi and I was not going to pass up an opportunity to visit the fantastic birding spot called Thattekad, just about 42km from Kochi Airport, and the Sholas of Munnar, about 60km from Thattekad.

Thattekad Bird Sanctuary

Thattekad Bird Sanctuary, nestled in the picturesque Western Ghats of Kerala, is a paradise for bird enthusiasts and nature lovers alike. Spanning over 25 sq km, this sanctuary is also known as the Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary, after the eminent ornithologist Dr Salim Ali, who played a crucial role in its establishment and conservation efforts. The sanctuary is renowned for its rich biodiversity, especially its avian population.

A view of the thick tropical rainforests of Thattekad

Its diverse habitats, including tropical evergreen and deciduous forests, grasslands, and rivers, provide a perfect haven for a wide array of bird species. Over 300 species of birds have been recorded here, making it one of the richest bird sanctuaries in India.

One of the key attractions of Thattekad Bird Sanctuary is the opportunity to spot endemic and rare bird species. The Malabar Grey Hornbill, a striking bird with its grey plumage, is commonly sighted here. The vibrant Malabar Barbet adds a splash of colour with its crimson throat and green plumage.

The sanctuary is also home to the elusive Sri Lanka Frogmouth, known for its camouflage and nocturnal habits, making it a sought-after sighting for bird watchers. Also sometimes seen here is the Sri Lanka Bay Owl - a mystic bird indeed.

Sri Lanka Bay Owl

Birders also come here for the Great Eared Nightjar, but it is extremely hard to spot this bird. Another notable resident is the Indian Pitta, with its colorful plumage of green, blue, and rusty orange. The sanctuary's riverine habitats attract numerous water birds such as the Indian Cormorant, Little Cormorant, and several species of herons and egrets. The Indian Roller, with its striking blue and cinnamon plumage, is a common sight, often seen perched on wires or trees.

Apart from birds, Thattekad is also home to various other wildlife species including elephants, leopards, sloth bears, and several species of snakes and amphibians. Given the number of elephants in the Sanctuary, many areas are cordoned off regularly by the Forest Department staff.

Thattekad Bird Sanctuary stands as a testament to Kerala's commitment to biodiversity conservation and eco-friendly tourism. Whether you are a seasoned birder or a casual nature enthusiast, a visit to this sanctuary promises a memorable experience amidst the sights and sounds of some of India's most captivating birdlife.

Sholas of Munnar

The Shola forests of Munnar, nestled amidst the Western Ghats in Kerala (and parts of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka), are a unique and vital ecosystem renowned for their biodiversity and ecological significance. These montane evergreen forests are characterized by their distinctive dwarf trees, dense undergrowth, and mist-covered valleys, creating a habitat that supports a rich variety of flora and fauna, including several endemic bird species.

One of the key endemic bird species found in the Shola forests of Munnar is the Nilgiri Wood Pigeon. This large, colourful pigeon with its distinctive yellow legs and red facial patches is a highlight for birdwatchers exploring the higher altitudes of the Shola forests. Another endemic species is the Nilgiri Flycatcher, a small and strikingly beautiful bird with its blue and black plumage, often seen darting between branches in search of insects. Of course, the Black-and-Orange Flycatcher is not to be missed.

Black-and-Orange Flycatcher

Walking in Eravikulam National Park, known mainly for the endemic & highly endangered Nilgiri Tahr

ERAVIKULAM NATIONAL PARK
KERALA FORESTS & WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT
eravikulam national park
NILGIRI TAHR (Nilgiritragus hylocrius)
EVOLUTION
The Alps mountain ranges began to grow over 75 million years ago. During the course of evolution, a number of different species were evolved and split apart from the ancestors of the mountain goats somewhere in the Alps ranges. One among the species diverged to the east through the Kurdistan, Caucus and Iranian mountain Ranges.
Again, they crossed Pamir and the Hindukush Ranges to reach the mighty Himalayas. In the Himalayas they were subjected to further speciation due to the different atmospheric conditions prevailed.
During the time extreme weather patterns such as drought and ice age one of these species migrated and settled in the western Ghats from the western Himalayas. This is how Nilgiri Tahr (Nilgiritragus hylocrius) came in to the Western Ghats.
In the past, they must have been in many places in the Western Ghats. Today they are confined to the southern tip of Western Ghats as isolated groups along the high-altitude crests and its eastern and western flanks of Kerala -Tamil Nadu boundary.
Their favourite habitat is the rugged mountains which is not accessible to other large creatures. The extreme cold, rain and wind prevailing in these tall mountains are their normal living conditions. this marvellous species which successfully crossed many evolutionary processes in the past millions of years are now in the verge of extinction.
There are between 700 and 800 Nilgiri Tahrs living in Eravikulam National Park today. Here is the world's largest genetic pool of this animal. It is a miracle that this species survives beyond all the shocks that man has placed on its habitat.
Therefore, let us boast about the Eravikulam National Park.

An information board about the Nilgiri Tahr

Neela Kurinji, the blue inflorescence that blooms once every 12 years, and from which the Nilgiris gets its name

The stunted trees and open grasslands of the Sholas, misty and wet

The Nilgiri Pipit, a small bird known for its distinctive piping call, is also endemic to the Shola grasslands and open patches within these forests. The White-bellied Sholakili, a shy and elusive bird found in the dense undergrowth, adds to the allure of the Shola forests for bird enthusiasts.

Nilgiri Pipit

White-bellied Sholakili

Additionally, the Palani Laughingthrush, with its cheerful song and yellow underparts, is another endemic species that thrives in the cool, misty environment of Munnar's Shola forests.

Palani Laughingthrush

Crested Serpent Eagle

Conservation efforts in the Shola forests of Munnar are crucial for protecting these endemic bird species and their habitats. The Kerala Forest Department, along with various conservation organizations and local communities, has implemented measures to preserve the biodiversity of these fragile ecosystems. This includes initiatives such as habitat restoration, controlled tourism activities, and community-based conservation programs.

Efforts are also focused on raising awareness among visitors and locals about the importance of conserving the Shola forests and the endemic species they support. Sustainable tourism practices, such as eco-friendly trekking and birdwatching tours, are promoted to minimize the impact on the delicate ecosystem while providing opportunities for people to appreciate and learn about these unique environments.

In conclusion, the Shola forests of Munnar stand as a wonderful example of the biodiversity and natural beauty of the Western Ghats. Through concerted conservation efforts and responsible tourism practices, these unique ecosystems can continue to thrive, providing a sanctuary for endemic bird species and preserving the ecological balance of this remarkable region.

Oriental Scops Owl (rufous morph)

The list of birds seen during the trip:

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
1	Grey Junglefowl	*Gallus sonneratii*	21	Lesser Yellownape	*Picus chlorolophus*
2	Painted Bush Quail	*Perdicula erythrorhyncha*	22	Malabar Parakeet	*Psittacula columboides*
3	Greater Coucal	*Centropus sinensis*	23	Small Minivet	*Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*
4	Sri Lanka Frogmouth	*Batrachostomus moniliger*	24	Ashy Woodswallow	*Artamus fuscus*
5	Indian Swiftlet	*Aerodramus unicolor*	25	Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike	*Hemipus picatus*
6	Little Swift	*Apus affinis*	26	Black Drongo	*Dicrurus macrocercus*
7	Red-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus indicus*	27	Bronzed Drongo	*Dicrurus aeneus*
8	Little Egret	*Egretta garzetta*	28	Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	*Dicrurus paradiseus*
9	Indian Pond Heron	*Ardeola greyii*	29	House Crow	*Corvus splendens*
10	Medium Egret	*Ardea intermedia*	30	Large-billed Crow	*Corvus macrorhynchos*
11	Crested Serpent Eagle	*Spilornis cheela*	31	Common Tailorbird	*Orthotomus sutorius*
12	Brahminy Kite	*Haliastur indus*	32	Grey-breasted Prinia	*Prinia hodgsonii*
13	Sri Lanka Bay Owl	*Phodilus assimilis*	33	Ashy Prinia	*Prinia socialis*
14	Oriental Scops Owl	*Otus sunia*	34	Plain Prinia	*Prinia inornata*
15	Brown Fish Owl	*Ketupa zeylonensis*	35	Dusky Crag-Martin	*Ptyonoprogne concolor*
16	Malabar Grey Hornbill	*Ocyceros griseus*	36	Flame-throated Bulbul	*Rubigula gularis*
17	Asian Green Bee-eater	*Merops orientalis*	37	Red-whiskered Bulbul	*Pycnonotus jocosus*
18	White-cheeked Barbet	*Psilopogon viridis*	38	Red-vented Bulbul	*Pycnonotus cafer*
19	Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker	*Yungipicus nanus*	39	Indian White-eye	*Zosterops palpebrosus*
20	Black-rumped Flameback	*Dinopium benghalense*	40	Palani Laughingthrush	*Montecincla fairbanki*

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
41	Rufous Babbler	*Argya subrufa*	49	Pied Bushchat	*Saxicola caprata*
42	Velvet-fronted Nuthatch	*Sitta frontalis*	50	Nilgiri Flowerpecker	*Dicaeum concolor*
43	Southern Hill Myna	*Gracula indica*	51	Purple-rumped Sunbird	*Leptocoma zeylonica*
44	White-bellied Sholakili	*Sholicola albiventris*	52	Asian Fairy-bluebird	*Irena puella*
45	White-bellied Blue Flycatcher	*Cyornis pallidipes*	53	Jerdon's Leafbird	*Chloropsis jerdoni*
46	Tickell's Blue Flycatcher	*Cyornis tickelliae*	54	Golden-fronted Leafbird	*Chloropsis aurifrons*
47	Malabar Whistling Thrush	*Myophonus horsfieldii*	55	Black-throated Munia	*Lonchura kelaarti*
48	Black-and-orange Flycatcher	*Ficedula nigrorufa*	56	Nilgiri Pipit	*Anthus nilghiriensis*

Some other photographs taken during the trip:

Velvet-fronted Nuthatch

Ashy Woodswallow

Southern Hill Myna

Brahminy Kite

Bronzed Drongo

Black-throated Munia

Malabar Whistling Thrush

Nilgiri Flowerpecker

White-bellied Sholakili

Palani Laughingthrush

Brown Fish Owl

Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Painted Bush Quail (*Perdicula erythrorhyncha*)

Painted Bush Quail (Munnar, Kerala, October 1, 2017)

Order:	Galliformes
Family:	Phasianidae
Genus:	*Perdicula*
Species:	*P. erythrorhyncha*
Size:	17-19 cm

Description & distribution: The Painted Bush Quail is a species of quail found in the hilly forests of India, mainly from peninsular India south all the way to Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The male is dark but with some bright colours and patterns – black face, bright red bill and legs, stark white throat, bordered by black, and head stripe that goes across the forehead and down the side of the head, framing the mantle and nape. Underparts, from the chest all the way down to the vent, are brown with horizontal black markings. The female has brick-red underparts and lacks the white throat and head stripe.

Two sub-species are recognized: the nominate, *P. e. erythrorhyncha*, seen in the hills of the Western Ghats (south of Pune), Nilgiris and other hilly areas of South India including BR Hills, Shevaroys etc, and *P. e. blewetti*, found in the Satpudas and extending east into the northern parts of the Eastern Ghats, till Lambasinghi.

Habitat & behaviour: The Painted Bush Quail is usually seen in small coveys of 6 to 10 birds moving around together, coming out on open grassy patches, forest tracks and paths, foraging for seeds or grain and, sometimes, small insects. They are often seen to dust-bathe in the morning and evening. When flushed, they quickly scatter in different directions, later to reassemble with regrouping calls, which typically is a series of whistles. The territorial call of the male is a pleasant three-note *kirikee kirikee kirikee*, often repeated several times in succession. The alarm call is a liquid trill, and when startled, the birds tend to run in single file along the path before taking flight.

Nesting: The Painted Bush Quail breeds mainly between December and March, although there may be some local variations. Its nest is usually a shallow depression in the ground, typically at the foot of a bush or grass clump, and sometimes thinly lined with grass. The usual clutch consists of 6-7 eggs. Incubation duties are performed by the mother alone, and may last for 16-18 days before hatching. Females are known to aggressively defend their young, often attacking dogs or even humans that may venture too close.

Local name: The Painted Bush Quail is known as *'Kokni lowwa'* in Hindi, *'Kaadai'* in Tamil (a name it shares with other quail species too), *'Yelise'* in Telugu, *'Mani kada'* in Malayalam, *'Huker'* in Bengali and *'Huker gundri'* in Santhali.

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